



## **ESCAPING FROM EXISTENTIAL NIHILISM IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S FIGHT CLUB (1996)**

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### **Abstract**

This study discusses the Novel *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk. This novel tells a story about the effect of chasing perfection over self-destruction and escaping desperation. These problems appear in the main character's life, also known as The Narrator (Unnamed). In this thesis, the researcher is using two research questions. (1). What are the causes of existential nihilism that exist in the narrator's life? (2). How does the narrator escape existential nihilism to make his life meaningful? To answer these questions, there are several ways. The first way is to understand why existential nihilism appears in the life of the main character, as revealed in the novel *Fight Club*. The second way is by using the psychoanalysis approach by Sigmund Freud and the existential nihilism theory by Friedrich Nietzsche. The psychoanalysis approach and the existential nihilism theory will be useful for the analysis of the consciousness and unconsciousness of the narrator's personality and environment and the active and passive nihilism to define the way the narrator tries to escape. This is shown by the narrator's living his strange monotonous and egalitarian life and his suffering from insomnia.

**Keywords:** *existential nihilism, egalitarian, nihilism, escape*

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

These days, especially in modern society, life is more about an escape, escaping from something that humans cannot get passed their nature because human beings have different ways of living their lives. Modern society is characterized by many things. The most prominent thing is the extraordinary progress of technology and science. Technology and science help humans to make their life easier and more efficient. It creates products, innovations, services, leisure activities, and facilities for people with a lack of enjoyment in their life, it also creates communities,

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cultures, and characters that help people to shape society. We realize that as people who use technology and science, we are helping the market grow, by buying products and preserving the economy. Unconsciously, we create a new culture that is considered too negative, we became the product and we always feel dissatisfied with chasing perfection over self-destruction. This kind of activity is based on the view of Sigmund Freud (1915) that consciousness was only seen as a reflection or perception of mental activity, which was considered to be unconscious in and of itself. Freud viewed that conscious activity was considered a diversionary routine because the actual activity was unconsciously worse in meaning.

The question then is, what makes us obsessed with meaning? Martela & Steger (2016) states that there is a three-dimensional model of meaning. King (2006) also states that there are three parts to distinguish meaning from life when life is considered to have value beyond trifles or glimpses, life has a purpose, or life has a coherence that transcends chaos, they are perceived as meaningful. Heintzleman & King (2014), and Steger (2012) state that the meaning of life has three aspects; have value and importance in one's life, have a greater purpose in life, and have a coherent and logical existence.

People in modern society are known for their work discipline and perseverance; they have work cycles, as well as financial obligations to pay debts and an inconsistent workforce. They focus on the value and strength of the individual self. Descombes (2017) defines individualism as the distinguishing element of our modern cultures' intellectual systems. Modern man believes that he has absolute control over his life and that he must take responsibility for it. We must take responsibility for ourselves since we have no other method of perceiving ourselves or the world than through our existence.

The terms value and meaning emerged from the philosophical thought put forward by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche in his book *The Will of Power* (1901) writes that "a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist". Clark (2019) states that nihilism is defined as the devaluation of the highest values. It is because each individual tries to determine themselves at the highest thing so that they do not find anything at all in the end. In *Postmodern Nihilism: Theory and Literature* by Slocombe, Carr (2003) defines existential nihilism as "the sense of emptiness and futility that arises from the belief that "life has no value.". Rahmah et al. (2013) also define existential nihilism as a situation where a person no longer understands the condition and purpose of their life, so they feel empty and consider everything meaningless.

To find a way out of this problem, modern society also creates practical solutions to help people, especially for men to manage their lives. This solution has its characteristics, some can heal and some are increasingly destructive. In the novel itself, various practical solutions encourage the Narrator to be free from the effects of his absurdity (insomnia). *Remaining Men Together* is an escapist group that helps modern men solve their problems by expressing their feelings and thoughts. Meanwhile, in *Fight Club*, the problems that are issued can be in the form of dealing with physical abuse and slavery. The novel by Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996) is an Anarchist Psychodrama type of novel that responds to existential nihilism. The story ends with the main character finding a way out of the adversity he is

experiencing. *Fight Club* (1996) is a novel with the theme of Man vs His Shadow. The unnamed Narrator also famously known as /John/Tyler is a monotonous man who follows the flow of the times, works full time, does business trips, and has a consumptive lifestyle, The Narrator has a weakness for himself by having problems sleeping (insomnia). To find a way out of his problem, he must try therapy treatment in the form of "group sessions" since he is an egalitarian individualist who has zero happiness. The Narrator must be involved in a community that has the same suffering as himself. Like participating in the therapy group for testicular cancer patients (*Remaining Men Together*), which is filled by men. In the therapy group. The Narrator met Bob, a testicular cancer patient who had large breasts due to his mistake in consuming estrogen-enhancing products. The Narrator begins to go through several mental phases and meets Tyler Durden and Marla Singer. Tyler is the leader of an underground fighting group (*Fight Club*). Unbeknownst to The Narrator, Tyler is a mild-mannered insurance salesperson, the charismatic head of a domestic terrorist organization. *Fight Club* is also filled with men who want to have freedom within them. The group then became The Narrator's solution to overcoming his insomnia and existential crisis.

This thesis will focus on the view of existential nihilism in the narrator's life using the psychoanalysis approach and the existential nihilism theory. The psychoanalysis approach and the existential nihilism theory will discuss the consciousness and unconsciousness of the narrator's personality and environment and the active and passive nihilism to define the way the narrator tries to escape. This will be shown by the narrator's living his strange monotonous life and his suffering from insomnia. This thesis aims to find an escape from the problems experienced by the main character, namely the understanding of meaningful life from existential nihilism within the main character who is also known as The Narrator in the novel *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

In processing research data, the method used is a qualitative method with the technique of analyzing the main character (the narrator). In analyzing the character, the researcher defines the main problem (existential nihilism) and then divides the problem into an external view and a novel view. In the view of the novel, the author will explain the negative nature of the character and then how he tries to find an escape or solution, From the two escapes (counseling routine, and the fight club), a result is found in the form of realization. This thesis will focus on the view of existential nihilism in the narrator's life using the psychoanalysis approach by Sigmund Freud and the existential nihilism theory by Friedrich Nietzsche. The psychoanalysis approach and the existential nihilism theory will discuss the consciousness and unconsciousness of the narrator's personality and environment and the active and passive nihilism to define the way the narrator tries to escape things. Therefore, at the end of the study, the author will explain the relationship between the main character and the term the famous wise man (the overman) by Friedrich Nietzsche.

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter reveals the reasons and answers, from The Narrator / Tyler Durden in escaping his life from existential nihilism in the Novel *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk, that the idea is existing in part of his life. This analysis uses the philosophical concept driven by Friedrich Nietzsche and the theory of psychoanalysis to understand the intentional and accidental reasons that the narrator must build this entire nihilism in his existence and how he escapes from it.

### 4.1 Existential Nihilism in The Novel *Fight Club* (1996)

In the novel *Fight Club* (1996) the monotonous life and aggressiveness of an anarchic character illustrate how the reality of human social life today. In modern society, especially in western society. The monotonous life and aggressiveness of anarchists are indeed seen as a normal path for the character. This problem indicates the existence of modern humans as a group of people who are lost in their world. The setting in this novel is a picture of today's American lifestyle, more precisely in the late 20th to 21st centuries. Therefore, the problems described can still be relevant today. In the novel *Fight Club* (1996), Chuck Palahniuk has a theme for this novel which is about the exploration of the shadow. Either it can be consciously dangerous, or unconsciously dangerous. "*This isn't death,*" Tyler says. "*We will be a legend. We won't grow old.*" (p.11). From the quotation, it can be revealed that the novel progressively wanted the character to be more experiencing the saturation that he had in his life, after all the things, such as nihilism, and dangerous life. "*You justify anarchy,*" Tyler says. "*You figure it out.*"(p.11). The novel wanted the character to be more open and realize that someday what we want to achieve even if we never realized it, will mean something in our life. In this analysis chapter, the novel reveals the forms of Existential Nihilism, such as life is not meaningful according to The Narrator, the intentional escaping by finding an escape from absurdity (DID), and an egalitarian lifestyle that leads to not a meaningful life.

### 4.2 Escaping from Existential Nihilism

Tragedy and the past are two things that cannot be separated. In existential nihilism, according to Nietzsche, tragedy is often called "*the great cultural facts of mankind*". According to Clark (2019), he states that "*the great cultural facts of mankind*" is an expression that emerges from a culture that develops into practice beyond simple enjoyment. Longeway (1990) states that the escapist avoids an unnecessary belief and aims not just to rest from some unpleasant reality, but to avoid that reality entirely.

The Narrator in the Novel *Fight Club* is someone who often talks about a tragedy that happened in the past, how his parents treated him, especially the role of a father for him.

*"Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise."* (p.50)

What happens according to the quote above is the kind of problem that often occurs in modern western society. As Nietzsche said that this is a cultural influence, then it becomes an enjoyment for them. For the Narrator, what his father did was a terrible thing, while for his father it was enjoyment. This gives rise to a further tragedy, appearing in the narrator, namely experiencing multiple personalities. He created DID or *Dissociative Identity Disorder*.

*“Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.”* (p.168)

From the quote above, it can be revealed that the narrator begins realizing that all of this time, he has created a hallucination, and he thinks that everything is a dream. According to Merriam-Webster (2022), the definition *Dissociative Identity Disorder* is a personality disorder, that is characterized by the presence of two or more identities or personalities whose differences are very complex, each of which dominates and controls behaviour, memory, and identity. This problem is also depicted in another quote :

*“I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not. I’m not Tyler Durden.”* (p.174)

From the quotation above it can be revealed that The Narrator struggles with his place in society by adhering to the corporate path that has been laid out for him by others. This means that compliance is portrayed to the public as morality, and the narrator "desperately" wants to be a moral person, leading to the projection of his psyche onto an alter ego that he has created for himself. It manifested as a "shadow" before exploding into sexual anxiety, insomnia, and loneliness. Tyler Durden is part of his escape, unbeknownst to himself is the charismatic leader of a domestic terrorist organization.

#### 4.2.1 Becoming Self-Awareness

In his attempt to break free from existential nihilism, the narrator not only tries to get out, but he also recognizes that his efforts will pay off. The result that the narrator will achieve will be a realization, and this realization is by no means his conscious behavior, but rather that he experiences realization unconsciously. This appears when there is a warning, from that warning, the narrator is helped to become aware of all the negativity that exists in his life, even within the scope of modern society. This warning can be revealed in the quotation above :

*“A lot of young people try to impress the world and buy too many things. A lot of young people don't know what they want. Young people think they want the whole world. If you don't know what you want, you end up with a lot you don't.” (p.45-46)*

This warning happened after The Narrator's condominium got blown up by a mysterious figure, and when The Narrator tries to approach the idea behind all of this destruction, then comes to a realization. This can be implied that the narrator himself, and even the people around him are not even like the system they live in. This system is full of nonsense happiness, people chasing fake freedom, and ending up being a product that they couldn't escape. This brought the narrator to the realization, that to escape the system, he needs something or someone to learn from. From this moment the narrator started begging for help, he then chase Tyler Durden.

*“I called Tyler. The phone rang in Tyler's rented house on Paper Street. Oh, Tyler, please deliver me. Oh, Tyler, please rescue me. And the phone rang. Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art. May I never be complete? May I never be content? May I never be perfect? Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete.” (p.45-46)*

From the quotation above, it can be revealed that The Narrator only has one answer for all of his problems, and that is Tyler Durden. He knows that Tyler is capable of handling things and solving complex problems, he realized that Tyler has everything that he couldn't have, so the last hope would be Tyler himself. This also implies that The Narrator's addiction to collecting corporate products is the only way for him to be a perfect modern man, and after being perfect he could be complete so that no one could ever compete for his succession.

#### 4.2.2 Joining Therapy Group

For the escape theme, the narrator took two different ways, at this point he could become either passive or active. To understand that, the narrator took the first method by going to The Remaining Men Together. This form of escape is what a doctor suggested for him, an egalitarian way to end the suffering, in which everyone had the same problem as him, and to overcome it, the only way is to cry together.

*“This should be my favorite part, being held and crying with Big Bob without hope. We all work so hard all the time. This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation.” (p.18)*

*“This is when I'd cry. Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash. Anything you're ever proud of will be thrown away. And I'm lost inside.” (p.17)*

From the quotation above, it can be revealed that in escaping his mundane routine at work, The Narrator would search for help in the therapy group, mainly for men. This kind of escape is the most valuable path right now, especially in this modern era. When men take the responsibility for themselves, they would do anything to survive. At this moment, the narrator could let go of the absurd in his life, which is insomnia. The Narrator also equalizes the therapy group with a vacation. For some people, taking a vacation is like traveling or going somewhere to make themselves feel better or it can be said as an escape for them, but for The Narrator himself in doing such a thing he would experience a tiresome, lack of sleep or anxiety. This problem could appear in another quotation, such as :

*“You wake up at Air Harbor International. You wake up at O’Hare. You wake up at LAX. You wake up at Logan. You wake up at SeaTac. You wake up at SeaTac, again. You wake up at Logan, again. You wake up at O’Hare, again. You wake up at LAX. Again. You wake up at the beach. You wake up, and you’re nowhere. You wake up, and that’s enough.” (p.25-33)*

From the quotation, it can be seen that the routine plunged him into an unescaped phenomenon, he felt trapped inside and outside, and he is unhappy about his life. He always wakes up in different places which only happened at the Airport, or during his job duty. However, in this case, The Narrator also brings up a statement that in escaping something he had to let go of something else to achieve the escape. Crying reduced his insomnia and crying made him lose inside and forget all of his responsibility to the routine he had.

During his time in the therapy group, The Narrator also explains that his identity is secret, and he felt so free about it, which indicates that he still passively escaping from his nightmare which is Existential Nihilism. This can be seen in the quote, he states that *“I never give my real name.”* The Narrator tries to present to his surroundings that he is a nobody, he is just trying to recover from his insomnia and only came to let out a cry. Therefore, the name of the narrator is not so important. The other reason would be that The Narrator thinks his idea of giving a private identity is unnecessary, because this is the way to avoid attention from anyone, especially when the narrator not only appears in the Remaining Men Together but also in another therapy group, each group he went has different nametag for him such as Tyler Durden, Sebastian, Joe, Jack, Cornelius or Rupert.

From these groups and “vacation”, from all the touring things he did (trying all kinds of therapy groups), The Narrator’s felt amazing about himself, he became addicted, for almost years. He said, *“Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born. Resurrected.”* This quote implies that this is not the kind of his true escape, this is just some kind of repetition he does to amaze himself, and to escape in a short time. This is bad for someone who finds themselves unhappy about life, the short-time escape would bring another problem for The Narrator himself, and that helps him to create his other identity or DID, consciously and unconsciously to become the Tyler Durden.

#### 4.2.3 Getting Involved in Fight Club

In the course of his escape, the narrator not only takes group therapy as a recovery period but by accident, he creates a group with Tyler Durden, namely Fight Club. A group of fighters formed in the basement of a bar. Fight Club serves not only men who already get punched in the face but all kinds of men. The working class, the sick one, the rich guy, the entertainer, the merchant, the businessman, father, and son. Fight Club appears to fix something that modern man couldn't fix, which is the imperfection :

*“Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to the fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. There's grunting and noise at the fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved.” (p.51)*

Fight Club is not just a fighting group that does not have a purpose, Fight Club provides a form of therapy for its members, and even fight clubs shape the character of its members. The Narrator explained that in Fight Club he felt violence can be equalized with a group in the church, and ends up feeling safe after attending it. This implies that in this modern society, the only way to feel safe is to be violent. Violence creates such freedom and from violence, they could understand how the world works.

In Fight Club, the Narrator's also explained that a secret group of men fighting inside a bar basement also created some rules for the men. This indicates that this group can not be passed by anyone else, except for the people who are really into Fight Club and all they wanted to save their life from being a slave to morality. These rules of Fight Club can be seen in the quotation below:

*“The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club. The second rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club. The third rule in fight club is when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over. Etc” (p.48)*

Fight Club provides rules for its members, this is in complete contradiction with the Narrator's objection, which when he visits some group therapy, he enjoys his visits without any rules at all in the therapy group, that's why he calls the place of therapy group as a "vacation". However, in Fight Club, the available rules such as the first rule and the second rule “*you don't talk about fight club*” indicate that these rules reflect the personality of The Narrator himself, or even of its members. It seems that no one has to divulge what a Fight Club is, and no one has to widely know that a Fight Club exists. The reflection seen in The Narrator with the rules of Fight Club is the same as keeping his identity a secret, so Fight Club becomes a very suitable thing for the Narrator in finding a way out. Although this is consciously dangerous, or unconsciously dangerous for The Narrator.



#### 4.2.4 Counseling “The Famous Wise Men”

In the book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006), Nietzsche explains in one of the chapters, *The Famous Wise Men*, in this chapter he says a lot about one belief in a popular prejudice formed by great thinkers or wise men. This is indeed beneficial for some people. However, people have tired of pursuing truth and truth isn't always absolute. In this case, based on the novel *Fight Club*, The Narrator meets a wise man who became an inspiration or a god for modern-day people, namely Tyler Durden. The Narrator and Tyler created Fight Club, based on popular prejudice, that being a slave to morality, consumerism, and so on is what destroys men in modern times, so they don't understand the meaning of their lives.

The moment how The Narrator formed the fight club occurred when he first met Tyler Durden. In that encounter, the narrator tries to give up his belief in what will happen next, to eradicate his insomnia. This can be revealed in the statement below:

*“Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage. This is how I met Tyler Durden.”* (p.25)

Tyler Durden serves as an inspiration for men who are being emasculated by the system and social standards. He depicts everything with preach and actions, which became an inspiration for every man. Tyler's despise for the concept of an egalitarian lifestyle, consumerism, nihilism, and advertising, these idea makes him different in making his life choices. This also becomes an inspiration for every modern man. Every modern man in America is characterized by having an uncertain life journey. They look for meaning and value, but they are defeated by the systems and social structures that have been formed for a long time. This can be seen in the quotation below:

*“I didn't want to, but Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight and wanting to know more about himself. About self-destruction. At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves.”* (p.52)

Tyler's ideas about things related to self-overcoming are the buried ideas of everyone who tries to escape from something. Tyler became the cog, the other side of the narrator, as well as the modern thinker. Tyler also inspired the idea of self-destruction, which for some people, this idea is very restricted. To do this, they need a lot of energy waste. People only like to calm themselves by going to support groups or using medicine. Tyler is against these ideas and routines, so he formed an idea of self-destruction, this idea applies by destroying ourselves (body, possession, achievement) will make us free. Not only that this idea will made us free, but also, we will understand ourselves even better.

Tyler introduces the idea of self-destruction by making The Narrator understand how pain works. This activity resulting The Narrator realizing that, hitting bottom means fully understanding himself. This can be seen in the quotation above :

*“Picture the fire still burning, except now it’s beyond the horizon. A sunset. ‘Come back to the pain,’ Tyler says. This is the kind of guided meditation they use at support groups. Don’t even think of the word pain. Guided meditation works for cancer, it can work for this. ‘Look at your hand,’ Tyler says. Don’t look at your hand. Don’t think of the word searing or flesh or tissue or charred. Don’t hear yourself cry. Guided meditation. You’re in Ireland. Close your eyes.” (p.75)*

From the quotation above, it can be seen that Tyler tries to give The narrator the definition of pain, in this situation when Tyler pours lye into The Narrator’s hand and make The Narrator deal with pain, his hand is burning. This moment seems to make the narrator fight with himself, he has to think about beautiful things and Tyler forces him to focus on the pain. Tyler intends to open the narrator's mind, that in pain, there is an achievement. This achievement can be in the form of awareness, freedom, and even strength. Tyler even quotes *“This is the greatest moment of your life,” Tyler says, “and you’re off somewhere missing it.”* This indicates that The narrator has not fully wanted to feel or has not tried to achieve freedom, and from there Tyler says so. Because everyone who is in pain, will rise and understand the meaning of the pain itself. Tyler acts as a wise man with ideas beyond everyone's control. Even the narrator who is a part of him cannot control Tyler's ideas, consciously or unconsciously. Because, Tyler is a contrasting figure from the idea of existential nihilism, he is seen as a way out of the problem.

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

In this thesis, the analysis of The Novel *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk focuses on the way of The Narrator escape from existential nihilism and defines his fundamental beliefs in chasing perfection over anything. This analysis uses the qualitative method with psychoanalysis to understand the psychological demand from the main character, and *the overman* (the famous wise man) concept from the theory of existential nihilism by Friederich Nietzsche in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006),

In this analysis, the issue of escaping from existential nihilism appears in the life of the narrator. The narrator experiences terrible habits and is lost in the way he chooses to live. This is because the narrator tries to be perfect and complete for himself, unbeknown to himself that the desires and everything he got from the terrible habits make him lose meaning and value. The narrator also tries to escape the problem by making himself present in any support groups, whether it’s counseling or physical abuse. This way of escape plunges him into the idea of active and passive nihilism. The narrator used to be a passive nihilist, but after a realization

and hatred toward the system, he slowly begins to be an active nihilist; he threw away, blown-up his apartment, kills his boss and cooperated with Tyler Durden.

This gets to the conclusion that to escape from his absurdity, The Narrator puts away his beliefs in the chase of being perfect. First, I define that in the novel *fight club* there is a belief that the life of the narrator is a parable of the philosophical idea of existential nihilism. Then I give the reason the narrator has routines and beliefs in his life about the meaninglessness of his life. Then the way of life of the narrator, and how he plays a role in society, by explaining that the narrator is part of an egalitarian society that consumes products and becomes a product. Then, I give how the narrator tries to escape his absurdity from existential nihilism, in this explanation, I give two examples, namely counseling routine and the fight club (physical abuse) which are related to passive and active nihilism. From there comes the result in the form of realization, where this realization can be found in the narrator himself, even from his environment, such as the famous wise man, which is a belief about new ideology and freedom raised by someone wise. Therefore, the narrator has a belief that can arouse himself from existential nihilism and finds meaning and value in his life.

Based on the analysis, I find it hard to blend two different approaches which are the philosophical approach (Existential Nihilism) and the literary approach (Psychoanalysis). The novel *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk can be analyzed using different theories/approaches, like the Narrative and Readers-Response Theory, because in the story, the plot often depends on the narration of the main character. Therefore the researcher suggests that in analyzing the novel, other researchers can use the Narrative and Readers-Response Theory to analyze the novel *Fight Club* (1996).

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